

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

Interview with Eddie Willner
May 25, 1989
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PREFACE

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EDDIE WILLNER

May 25, 1989

- Q: O.K. I would like to begin by asking you your complete name.
- A: O.K. My complete name is Eddie Helmwood Willner. I was born with the name Helmwood Willner and the name Eddie was given to me later in Belgium as a refugee child.
- Q: When and where were you born?
- A: I was born on the 15th of August, 1926 in Munchglablak, Germany, which is West Germany near Cologne-Dusseldorf, a town of about 150,000 people.
- Q: Could you tell me about how the Eddie came about?
- A: O.K. When the Kristallnacht happened in Germany, my father decided at that time that his son has to get out of Germany if he cannot get out of Germany and my father was one of those Germans who believed because he served the German Army in World War I, that they would not touch him since he was decorated and in the beginning they did make exceptions but later on it was all the same. When he decided it wouldn't, it would be the same like everybody else, he wanted to get me out of Germany so he sent me, they put me on a train to Brussels, Belgium where I was picked up in Brussels by a Jewish refugee organization which placed me with a Dutch family. And when I lived with this Dutch Jewish family, uh, I was of course sent to school and I was told that I could not have the name Helmwood in Belgium it was too German and the Germans were still hated from World War I so they gave me the name Eddie and I, the name I kept since today, until today.
- Q: I am going to ask about the Dutch family, but first I would like to ask about the taking leave of your parents. Do you remember saying goodbye to them?
- A: Yes, I remember saying goodbye to them. When the papers came that I could, was allowed to leave Germany from the police, my father, uh, uh, had almost what I felt, we felt was a heart attack, but it wasn't - he was just over excited and uh he almost passed out and it was quite a thing for him and for my mother of course too to get me out of Germany, to know me on the safe uh side, and uh, it was, it was for me as a boy, it wasn't as shocking as, because I was too young, it was almost like going, being sent to an uncle or aunt in a faraway place, but uh, I, the only thing I was worried about was leaving my parents behind. Because I knew at that time already what this was all about.
- Q: Did they give you anything to take with you _____?
- A: No, I think the uh, uh, the uh, uh, laws at that time were you couldn't take any shoes, extras, I could take my clothing along. No, I, I do have a kidoscop, a silver kidoscop, that I took along and that was about all. It was wrapped up in uh my clothing.

Q: Do you still have that?

A: I still have that. And it was saved by non-Jewish people.

Q: You mentioned your father had been in the German Army _____ I understand _____

A: Yes. Uh, which, uh, when Hitler came to power in 1933, uh, Germany wanted to rearm, of course, and, uh, the military, uh, were, uh, in vogue again and uniforms and uh medals were being worn because Hitler wanted a new army, a big army, and as a result, by Field Marshall Von Hindenberg, which was the President of Germany, Hitler was the Chancellor, of course, they created the Iron, the Cross of Honor which was given, as I understand, to people like my, my father who had earned uh, the Iron Cross during World War I and who had served for four years on the front lines. In other words, if he had served probably in the rear he probably wouldn't get it. But it was given uh to a lot of people just because Hitler wanted to make it popular again that the army is great and medals are great and so on and to uh. So, my father was uh, was given by the authorities a certificate with a medal which I still have to this day which was saved by a German Catholic family that he gave it to that had also served with my father in World War I. And uh the certificate uh I, reads basically uh - in the name of the Fuhrer and Reich Chancellor, which was Hitler, of course, given in my father's name, and uh, in uh, it gives the law that was passed to give this to people and I think it was a mistake to give it probably to the Jews but some of them slipped through. I don't know if everybody got it but I, I understand there are other people got it and uh, it says the Cross of Honor for front line combatants, and the date on it is, the, the name of the city, Muchenglabach (ph), is mentioned on there, the 7th December, 1934. And uh by order of the police president and uh, it is of course the swastika on it can be seen and the stamp that is on there and the city seal and the certificate 1, W 1 F.

Q: Do you have the medal with you?

A: Yes, I do have the medal with me too. This is the Iron Cross and this is the Cross of Honor which were, which was worn even on the uniform and sometimes in a smaller, in a small version of it on civilian clothing.

Q: And how were you able to get these _____?

A: Well, my father had a, you cannot call it a wallet, but it is a leather folder and I happened to know the story of this. He kept his war pictures in here. And, uh, the pictures, uh and some other pictures were given, and plus these medals were stuck in, he had given to this family and they gave it back to me. The leather wallet here, it is very heavy leather, and is, the story is that it was from a saddle, ah, ah, it was shot from underneath my father during the war uh, and, uh, the saddle was riddled by bullets so it couldn't be used anymore and he got a new saddle, and so from the old saddle, he locally he had a little wallet made to put his war pictures in here. And, uh, uh, and it says on there Russia 1915

near Smorngorn, so apparently that's where this happened, the incident, and that's all I know about that. Except that my father didn't get hurt at all. The horse was dead but, and the saddle was uh bullet ridden and uh but my father didn't get hurt.

Q: O.K. Now you were twelve, thirteen years old, went to Belgium, and you lived with a Dutch Jewish family. What was their family name?

A: Their name was Leek, L - E - E - K. And the lady was named, by name of Wanda Carr. And they were both Jewish and had two children which were already uh grown-ups and I lived them as their little brother and until the war started in 1940.

Q: Did they have to explain your being in the family to any of the authorities?

A: No. No. There was no problem.

Q: And between December '39 when you arrived and May '40 when war broke out, what was your daily routine?

A: My daily routine was only going to school to learn what languages and eventually I also had to go and see a rabbi to be bar mitzvah, which I never was, and uh because the war started in meantime. The family was not very religious but uh they did insist that I take lessons to be Bar Mitzvah. Uh, an additional thing uh which I should not forget is that my parents about six months later also arrived in Belgium but without papers. They had, they were able to get across the border with some guide because we were very near the border my father knew a lot of people and some Christian friends helped him to get across the border.

Q: Did you meet up with you parents at that point?

A: Yes, my parents came to Belgium in 19, uh 39, probably the middle of '39, and uh, they did not have any money had to leave everything behind, they just had to walk across the border. And uh, they were in a refugee status in Belgium and uh, they were furnished a little room which was not big enough for me to live with them, but it was agreed by them that I would remain with the Dutch family where I was very happy uh and it was a rather large family, and, but I was able to see my parents on weekends. And during the week too. And, uh, till of course the war came and that's another story.

Q: Let's talk about that. What do you remember, starting with _____?

A: O.K., O.K. Uh, my father was considered a political refugee from Germany. Now political refugees from Germany were not just Jews but they were communists, democrats, anybody who had fled Germany because of Hitler. And when the war started, the Belgians and the French, uh, arrested everybody that was German, men first, uh, mostly men, in some cases some women, but my mother and I did not get arrested because we were German. My father was arrested because he was a German and they knew that he was Jewish, but these were the laws and they arrested everybody that was

German, and put them in internment camps - not concentration camps but internment camps in southern France - St. Cyprien, Gurs, Rivesaltes and there were several others. Now at the time my father was arrested, by the police of course, Belgium police, we only knew that all these men were being transported to France because the German advance came very fast and they had to put them somewhere. At that time we decided, my mother and I decided, or rather my mother decided, that we should go and look for my father. We knew southern France, we had some names, but we weren't sure. So we tried to get across the border ahead of the German Army into France. At the border, Belgian, at the Belgian-France, uh French border, uh we were arrested for being Germans. They looked at our ID cards, Belgian ID card, which were for foreigners, and it said of course nationality German. We were arrested by the police at the border, trying to cross, and were put in prison. Uh, my mother was put in the women's section, and I, for the first time in my life, was in a prison cell, and that was one of the worse experience, experiences up to that date, of my life, because I was in solitary so to say, I was all by myself in a cell, for almost a week. And the Germans bombed the city. I can't recall the city right now but it was at the border, it was a small town, Vavik (ph) was the name of the city, Vavik (ph). And, uh, the women's section was served by nuns and I got to see my mother only once when she was being walked in the courtyard. After a week, or about a week, we were all assembled in the courtyard, all, more, more, I would think, there were mostly Jews from Germany and put on a train under heavy guard and sent to southern France to the _____, which is rather large camp which later on became more famous because they put uh the Jews from Baden (Ballon) (ph) in there and other people. It was originally a camp that was created by the French to put the remnants of the French, of the uh Spanish uh army who were fighting Franco in there when they fled to France they were put in there. But most of them they were gone by the time we came there. There were a few of them left who had not been resettled. And we were put in the _____, which in the Pyrenees, in the southern part of France. Uh, then the war was over pretty quick which we all know, and uh, where to go. There were releases everyday people got released. If you had papers to go to some foreign country, the French were glad to get rid of the people. The food was terrible there and people were, there were no killings, mass killings or anything like that but uh people died from hunger. If you didn't have any packages coming in from the outside there was a good chance you would die from hunger there. And there is a very large cemetery which I visited after the war, and uh, I assume that most people are buried there. There were no crematoriums, uh crematoriums, and uh, so, uh the camp itself was very, very bad. It was muddy, it was filthy, it was uh full of fleas, uh uh and it was just a makeshift camp. And uh so then the time came for some people to leave to be released, and uh uh, as we know it was the unoccupied zone of France, and uh but the Germans did have some control because Germans did come there with the French, the Vichy police, or Vichy government officials, uh and uh, made sure that uh certain people are kept in there, but by that I mean probably German communists who were so-called enemies of the German state. Now when it came to the women and children, like my mother and myself, uh they say can you go anyplace. And we decided we would look for my father and it was also at that time determined that my father as in the _____ which is on the Mediterranean coast. I failed to mention that the first camp is toward the Atlantic coast, one in the Pyrennes _____ and one is the Bas-Pyrennes of France, so we said we had

a destination finally; we said we wanted to join my father. We didn't know whether or not he was going to be released but he was there.

Q: What year is this?

A: I am talking about 1940, late. Uh, we traveled to this place, we found my father, and uh, through again some help of the French, but at the time we were all speaking French pretty well, uh, we uh, went to a little town called Auchtafa (ph) in the Pyrenees, near in, uh very close to the Spanish border, near Pier-pinon (ph) which is the _____ place and the people were very helpful, the French in this particular, very small village in the mountains and uh who were uh had a lot of vineyards and that was their business mostly up there. And the French priest who was in a nearby parish had a house in this little place near the church, and he made his house available to some Jewish refugees and there were about three families living in this house. So my mother and I got refuge there, then we went to visit my father and there were visiting hours I think twice a week. We went to see my father and, uh, this went on for a couple of weeks or months, and uh, during one of the visits, we didn't go into the camp - there was sort of visiting enclosure with barbed wire, and we could sit and chat for an hour or so, and during one of the visits when the visit was over, and they said all visitors leave, the uh French policeman who was in charge of the group there, Vichy policeman, told me where, that I wasn't going to leave, and uh, I say well I came in, uh, I am already resettled. All he said I am not considered a child anymore, I am a man. I was fourteen at the time, and uh, I was kept in, just like that. They say you stay with your father here, you're you're not a child, you're a man. So all of a sudden my status changed, I was not able to go back and stay with my father. Uh - I was, uh, among a group of men, I was the youngest one among a group of mostly German Jews or also some, one German communist I remember and one German nobleman who had fought the Nazis who had, was fleeing from the Nazis and got caught there. And he was later delivered, uh turned over too to the Nazis when they came _____. Well, anyway, he, uh I was in another camp in _____ and then a year later the rumors came, in 1941, 1942 I guess, uh this was still the end of 1941, the rumor came that all the Jews are going to be transferred to camps, work camps in Germany, and uh the French of course wanted to get rid of us and the Germans needed labor. Uh, in part some of the people were shipped to labor camps in France. This was not a labor camp, this, this was just, St. Cyprien was just an internment camp, there was no work being done there, it was uh on sand, on a sandy beach actually on the Mediterranean. And uh, but people, people were being continually shipped out in groups and to labor camps throughout southern France. Well, then the word came that's not completely true, some people are also being shipped out to Germany, to concentration camps. At that time we were very well aware of concentration camps and concentration contrary to what some people think that some people say well we didn't know there were such concentration camps, I already knew it as a child before I went to Belgium, because people used to make jokes about Hitler and say well keep your mouth shut otherwise you will go to concentration camp and on the Kristallnacht, and that is a story I missed by the way, uh, when Jews were arrested in Germany, uh, my father left our home to look after his father and was not arrested, and it was just a coincidence and uh, his brother was arrested and his, uh my mother's brother was arrested and sent to Dachau Concentration

Camp. Well, uh the uh place my father went to was about twenty miles from where we lived and his father lived in the country in a home all by himself but his younger, my father's younger brother lived with him, and he was married to a non-Jew. And uh which is also an interesting story but I am getting off the subject there a little bit. She was offered to get a divorce from him because her brothers were in the Nazi party. And she refused. She say, she said will stay with him in the bad days, she will stay with him in the good days. And, but he was still living there, but his wife had taken refuge someplace when he was arrested and when my father came to his father's home, in _____, which is near Muchenglablak (ph), excuse me, they were demolishing the house inside. And there were Nazi storm troopers up there. As my father walked in and see what was going on, the storm troopers were from another city apparently, not from the same town, there was a common thing that they brought in people from outside, there there were no - but the Chief of Police was present, a small police force, and it so happened that the Chief of Police had been sitting in uh grammar school on the same bench with my father. And he recognized my father right away. He said, Ziechfred (ph), what, what are you doing here? Was I looking after my father. He said, uh, well you're not supposed to be here. But he said nobody told me and uh so he took him to the police station. He said I can't do but arrest you. I have to uh, anybody who shows up has to be arrested, so I have to take you police station to your status. BREAK police chiefs and let him see his brother in jail who was later on transported to Dachau and uh so knowing that my father had the Iron Cross and he had it too, my father always wore it in miniature uh form on his uh suit, particularly during the Nazi era, because he wanted to show that he was as good a citizen as anybody else, he did his duty for his country and so on and so. Uh, and he said, well he said we have to do something for you. I, I don't see where a front-line combatant should should be in jail the guy said. So he called the local police in Muchenglablak and they ordered that my father be sent back, but they didn't specify that he be sent back under escort or without escort, so this policeman took it on his own to send, to put my father on the bus and say when you get back to your hometown, you report to the police. He didn't send another policeman with him. My father never did. And therefore escaped arrest and was not arrested during Kristallnacht or the day after.

Q: Let's back up a little bit to talk about Kristallnacht. Do you remember seeing synagogues burning?

A: I don't remember seeing synagogue burning but I remember the synagogue the day or two days after, after it was burned, because uh we had to uh, uh, move out of German schools into a Jewish school. Uh, and the last school I attended, the Jewish school, was right in the, in the same building as the synagogue was. So we weren't able to go to school anymore. As a matter of fact I received a certificate from my teacher, uh Jewish teacher, only Jews were taught by Jews, and it said in there this letter is instead of certificate because the certificate was destroyed by fire, which was the fire in the synagogue, and uh, this man by the way is still living in New York, my old head teacher from the Jewish school and he is 87 years old today and I'm still in touch with him. And he saved his life by being hidden by two Christian families in the same town, Muchenglablak. He survived the war in Much.. and came to New York after the war. He had no children. Extremely

unusual, extremely unusual. But I uh believe, I am not sure, that he, the people that hid him were fellow teachers. And the women dyed their hair blonde, to survive the war.

Q: The synagogue was totally destroyed?

A: The synagogue was totally destroyed. Uh, there was an incident - the city, uh the Jewish community was apparently well liked and the anti-Semitism was not as bad as it might have been in some other German cities. And uh the police was sort of decent and didn't, of course the Nazis weren't and the storm troopers weren't and the SS weren't, uh, but the police were sort of decent because they respected the community. But there were some bad ones too, but in general, the police saw to it that not too people were bodily harmed.

Q: Do you remember other buildings that were destroyed as well?

A: Yes, the rabbi's house was, the, the, he lived in an apartment house. The furniture was thrown out through the window and we went by there on the way to school. And there was a piano on, on the sidewalk, smashed and other things, many other things. I remember that. And there were other homes which I didn't see of course where they threw things out into the street. And the stores of course. Since we had one main street there where there were a lot of stores, that was also street very close to our school and we walked through there many times and all the Jewish stores had their windows smashed.

Q: What had been your father's occupation?

A: My father was uh, as a representative for a silk tie factory in Krayfeld (ph) and uh, which is another town which is a silk capital, was the silk capital of Germany, and he worked as a representative for, for this company. That was his occupation.

Q: Did he have his own business?

A: Not his own business, no.

Q: O.K. Now when you were at the camp, went with your mother. (end of Tape)

A: no way, and uh to continue the story about that particular camp, _____-, when these rumors I started talking about came that people are transported to Germany, or to Poland maybe to labor camps, uh, my father felt we had to get out and the fact that uh we both spoke French pretty well there were occasionally French gendarmes - these were our guards who were at the uh the camp was surrounded by barbed wire and when these people did guard duty, some of them were sympathetic and every once in a while somebody would throw me a piece of bread. They came, there was one particular French gendarme who uh, whenever he was on duty I, he had something for me. He threw it over the fence, and I asked him one day if he heard that people are being transported. He says yes, if you can get out, get out. When he said if you can get out, get out, I thought he is insinuating to me that with him I have a chance to get out through the barbed wire under the fence when he is on guard duty, and that is exactly what happened. Both my father

and I escaped when this man was on duty - he turned around, he walked away like he didn't see it, this was at night. And we went to the village where my mother lived, and uh with the O.K. of the priest and with the O.K. of the mayor, who happened to be a communist, of that city, the mayor and the Catholic priest worked hand in hand, an unusual team, but at the time they thought they were fighting the Germans and I don't know _____ but I suspect that the mayor was a member of the _____. He was very anti-German and he tried to help. And by helping I mean that we had shelter from the priest. And he issued a phoney ID card. This was a real ID card but the number of the ID card was not registered at City Hall, and he took a big chance. Nothing happened to him that I know, but we were arrested later on based on that ID card, when Vichy police came under the guide of the Nazis, they raided places, they were looking for people, and I mean, also in addition they picked whoever else they could, particularly Jews. And during one of those checks, and we, I don't know to this date whether we were turned in by somebody, or the mayor was turned in by somebody or the priest was turned in by somebody. Uh, they also _____, I know that. But somebody must have told something, must have spoke something, either was unhappy about us or unhappy about the mayor or whatever was going on there. And uh so one day during a raid, we were all arrested and then we were shipped off and they compared the uh, uh IDs with what records were at City Hall and they found out they were phoney ID cards. And that is how we got caught. From there on we were sent in by train to Drancy, which is the big camp near Paris which was a collection camp for Jews from all over France. And uh after the war I found out what transport number I was in. Of course I didn't know at that time, nobody was telling anything. We stayed several days in Drancy, (cough) excuse me, and not knowing what our destination was and this was my father, mother and myself, plus the other Jewish families who were arrested in that little town in the south of France, uh, it was on 12th September, uh, 1942, that our transport was put together and these transport usually a thousand people, uh cattle cars, going out of Drancy, near Paris, to the east. There were rumors where we were going, but not rumors that we were going to be gassed or anything rumors of labor camps and so on. Uh, the transport that I mentioned and the date I found that after war because uh there is a book which was made uh, uh, published with the help of the French government and I think the Krazfelds (ph) had the hand in it and I have the book and in this book is my name, my parents, name, nationality, date of births, and the people that I was with on our transport, and from then I found after the war that our transport was transport number 31 out of Drancy, and I understand there total of 75,000 people involved in transports out of Paris, out of Drancy, and, like I say, we were transport number 31 and that transport left on the 12th of September, 1942 for Germany.

Q: Tell us a little bit about the trip.

A: Excuse me. The cattle cars were packed with people. There was very little food, what people had on them, and the only thing that I can remember that were given during the trip, on the trip towards Auschwitz, which I didn't know at the time but I found out later, uh, was water. We were guarded by uh Germans and in some places where we stopped- they had to get also food, we were given some water and uh, were able to empty buckets we used as toilets. But there was hardly space for everyone to lie down. Some people had

to sit up all night, people were packed in like sardines, several people died, some people committed suicide. In my particular car, a lady doctor gave birth to her own baby. And the child of course didn't survive; I don't know if she did. Uh. There was a most unusual event in my cattle car. Uh, being from Germany, my father was able to read through the cracks of the wood some of the station names that we went through, so we definitely knew that we were going to upper Salezia, which is now Poland, and which is near Breslau, what used to be the German city of Breslau, and where most of the concentration camps that we found out after the war were located, including Auschwitz, and a lot of the subcamps. Uh, the cars were opened at stations every once in a while and people were beaten up mercilessly and outside of that, people were starving. Uh, people didn't have any food, didn't bring anything along. Some people stuffed their pockets full of something and they ate it, but I don't remember ever having been given any food except that we were given water and in some cases people weren't even given water. So that a lot of people arrived dead or starved or whatever. Uh, on the way to Auschwitz, and again, I didn't know the destination at that time, at one station in, uh, I can't recall the name right now, in upper Salezia, a small station, the doors were opened, and they said all men out. That was the order. All men, working men that were able to work, out. Uh, like I said, this was not arrival at Auschwitz or any other camp, but it was just a small station, and uh, at that time I had to make a decision. In the meantime I was going on 16, and I was pretty strong because I had worked that summer in the French vineyards to make some money. And it was hard work so I had pretty strong muscles and uh it wasn't just that but uh uh the decision I had to make whether I was a child staying with the women or men. I wanted to stay with my father. And I came out and we didn't know at that time what it meant. Work meant able to survive. To live. And, but we didn't know what it meant for my mother and from that transport number 31, according to the, this book from the French government, of, of the thousand people or so, I think there are six survivors. They determined after the war. So all the women and children went straight into the gas chamber. At that point I searched for my mother after the war, and I wound up with the German Red Cross, or International Red Cross, at _____ and they had a listing saying that all the women and children went straight into the gas chamber, of that transport. So I assume that my mother was gassed right away on arrival at Auschwitz which was sometimes in September 1942. Uh, the decision I made to stay with my father was my lucky decision, and again, uh, maybe there was at the time a feeling if you worked, you can survive. And we didn't know, we thought maybe the women are also going to be put to work in factories or whatever. But I didn't know the gas chamber would be at the other end. Uh, again, I didn't know about my mother until after the war, and I searched for my mother in Brussels, Belgium, and in Muchenglablak, and various other places but I didn't find her, until I was determined that she actually did perish. Uh, my father and I were sent from that place in trucks to a small camp which was a subcamp of Auschwitz and in those days these small subcamps were called _____, which means forced labor camp of the Chief of the German Police and the Vice Fuhur of the SS which was Himmler of course. They had large names but they were small concentration camps in other words, under the control of the SS. Not always guarded by SS but sometimes by storm troopers, sometimes by soldiers, or helpers from the east which were in some case Ukrainians, or Polish guys, and frankly from my experience, I preferred the German soldiers who were guarded to

some of the other people who tried to prove they were better than the Germans and didn't like the Jews and were very uh sadistic sometimes. I'm not saying that the Germans or the Nazis were not sadistic but the uh first experience we have from these guards were the horrible experience and uh I always felt that I was maybe more German than they were. They called, so-called people who lived in the territories. They were sometimes Polish, sometimes German, in upper Salezia, and at that time they had opted to be German and some of the people didn't speak German that well. Their Polish was a lot better. And uh, the uh, experience we had, the initial experience was not very good. Of course, the initial experience was the roughest experience under the circumstances.

Q: Why don't you talk about that.

A: O.K. Prior to going to a larger camp, we were in two smaller camps and each camp was, I don't remember exactly the, I would say less than a thousand people. I think in one case it was six hundred and the other one may have been a thousand. One was the camp of Lazy - L - A - Z - Y, which was mainly for the construction or reconstruction of bombed-out railways. And we went out everyday to the, uh, we be marched under guard, to the sites where the railways had been bombed by the Russians I suppose. In those days I don't think the Americans were coming out that far. And they bombed two transports, whatever, and also building new railways, which was the hardest work because people were not strong and the food was very limited and uh, uh, the people were beaten to death on the job or in the camp. And the system was at that time whenever they needed more labor, new people were coming and being fed into the camp. Supposed they had in the camp of a thousand people, they had a hundred people who died during a week or two on the job. Well, they got a hundred more from a transport or from Auschwitz or wherever they got them from to be sent in to fill up the void. And uh, so we were also digging up unexploded bombs which, and, and this I did twice during my concentration camp career, uh, which was very dangerous of course and the German guard would stay pretty far away in case something exploded. And some people did get killed that way. Uh, but, uh, railroad work was probably among the hardest work that we ever did because people were not strong enough to lift up the rails, and uh, some people got crushed under the rails, and people fell down. Our clothing was uh, uh, limited. In the wintertime we had clogs on, we had shoes with wooden soles, blue/white stripped uniforms. In the beginning we had our own with the Star of David on it. Later on we got the blue/white-striped uniforms. Uh, but it was very, we weren't properly dressed, we didn't have the proper food, and people were just uh walking skeletons in a lot of cases. And a lot of people committed suicide. This was the most, the most vivid recalling I can do about the camps, is not people being killed but people committing suicide. Particularly in one camp that I am coming to later on which was the last camp. Uh, but nobody thought they were going to survive. Uh, the first camp, uh, was like I said most railroad and then later on we were sent to another camp and I don't know if the first camp was done away with, but the whole camp was transferred. We went to another camp and uh, when we worked on construction of bunkers and buildings for the Batta (ph) Shoe Factory which I assume was producing shoes for the German army because I don't think we were used for any non-military projects. They were all always in support of the military. So we worked near the Batta (ph) Shoe Factory. Uh and I was lucky in, I guess, in, in general I was lucky

that I was able to speak German. I had an advantage over the other Jews who were coming from Poland, who didn't speak German unless they spoke Yiddish, and uh, Yiddish to some unfortunately, to some of the Germans, to the SS was like waving a red, uh, red drape or something in front of because that showed he's Jewish. And if you're able to speak German, correct German, you got sometimes less beatings, or you were also able on the job to execute an order right away. You understand the order was given immediately. And that was very important. Some people picked it up pretty fast. Some of the other people, if they came from France, I'm not just saying uh Polish Jews, but the Jews from other countries, and in the first camps we were all Jews which changed later on through mix. Uh, and uh, if you were able to speak German and follow orders you got less beatings, you were able to do it right away, and if you had a team, uh, sometimes we had to work in teams uh loading lorries (ph) and we were two people or four people as a team and all of them spoke German. We tried to team up that way or working that way because it always worked better than shouting one, two, three or something like that in German. And the Germans, being very militaristic, and frankly there is something I forgot. I was grew up that way, to be almost like a, like a Prussian. My father was very great disciplinarian and uh, when he said go, I went, and when uh he said jump, I jumped, and so on and so on. It wasn't like our kids are today. And, but it helped me later on, being able to jump when the Nazis said to jump, you know, and to do things and understanding what they meant and doing it sort of a little bit of a military way. Uh, which I understand from uh, from other people that I swapped stories with after the war, it is true in many cases. If, if you knew the German language it definitely helped. And in some case, uh, uh, when we were building bunkers you had to read the diagram, how to, into uh concrete, solid concrete you have to put uh wiring and uh wiring has to be wired up a certain way that the designs, if it is rounded and so on, and it has to be tight with uh, with uh the wire, the smaller wire, and if you're able to read the diagram from German, your job was much easier. You didn't make any mistakes. And so on, so that helped. Anyway, the camps, the second camp I went to, I made by first great friend for life, uh although I still did have my father with me, but a youngster of my age was a Dutch Jew and I also forgot to mention since I lived with a Dutch Jewish family in Brussels, Belgium, I also picked up Dutch, which was spoken at home, but Dutch and Flemish is almost the same. And so I was very fluent in Dutch by that time, and I picked, uh, or he picked me, I picked him, uh, uh, a young man my age whose father and brother-in-law was also in the same camp. So we teamed up. We were about the same height, and the same age, and we teamed up, became very good friends and since uh he came with a group of Dutch Jews that arrived at the camp, and it is a sad experience to tell about the Dutch Jews. Because Holland was a country where people eat a lot of cheese, a lot of butter, all the rich things, uh, the Dutch Jews were dying like flies. All of a sudden no food at all or very little food, no butter, no cheese, and uh the Dutch Jews within a short, the shortest period of time, there were very few left. I don't, I think we did receive one time a group of two hundred Jews and within a matter of six weeks they were down to maybe fifty or less. I don't know exactly. Because uh, it was much harder on them, whereas the Jew from the East, a Polish Jew family who had always had a hard life, where lived in a ghetto maybe and who was poor, and didn't have all the rich foods, he was able to resist much better in a concentrate, for a longer period of time. In the end it was all the same. But uh, uh, that was a big difference with a Jew from the West and a

Jew from the East - the survival rate. Uh, a Jew from Poland was toughened up, or a Russian Jew or whoever they had from the, the eastern Europe. So in that respect I think, uh, there was greater survival rate among the eastern European Jews than the western European Jews. But the Dutch Jews were particularly badly hit because of their life style that they had before. So I teamed up with this boy. At the time probably more so than his family, his father and his brother-in-law were killed in the camp, and I must tell this story because Mike Swab (ph) was his name, my best friend, Mike, who unfortunately died in Holland two years ago of cancer, and we were the best of friends. As a matter of fact we're like brothers. And uh, Mike Swab's father and brother were killed by cold water shower. The team was, came back from work one day where there were a lot of Dutch Jews and they were lined up in the camp street, and they had said that they did not perform their job properly. They were sabotaging the German war effort, the Dutch Jews. And they took all these Jews who were in that particular group that came back from work and hosed them down - they call it hosing down. By that they took a fire hose in the middle of the winter, and this must have been 1942, to 43 the winter, and uh hosed the people the people had to stand at attention and they actually froze to death. This is, this is a winter not like here but uh a Polish winter you are talking about now. A eastern European winter, with snow on the ground, leaving people outside all night and by morning most of them were frozen to death. And that was the end of Mike Swab's father and brother-in-law. So from then on, we just became brothers and uh my father was of course still alive but uh, we then teamed up as a team and, at work, Mike knew German quite well, because first of all Dutch and German is very close and he picked it up very fast; he knew some before. Mike came from a rather large family and all of his family was wiped out. This is another story for after the war. But uh, we could not have been closer because in everything we just ticked, we just, he had the same ideas about how to survive and our main idea was to be able to escape. And I said here I have somebody who's, maybe my father won't be able to make it. I knew at that time he was getting weaker but he was pretty good at that time. So I said if we're going to make it, the young people are going to make it and uh, we then decided, in actual words I think you could almost say we made a pact, that we're going to stick it out together. We talked about it and then said we just have to help each other the best way we can. If you find some food, you share it with me. I find some extra food, I share it with you and it has to be complete honesty and none, none of this taking away from the cabin. Many times it feels people come like beasts sometimes when they are hungry, and uh, become dehumanized. And we're not become, we're not going to become dehumanized. We're going to remain the way we came as much as possible and we're going to get out. Never to leave that idea behind that we're not going to make it. We are going to make it. And uh, that was the singlest biggest thing in my life, I'm sure his life, that uh, that made me so live, plus a lot of luck, plus a lot of faith, plus a lot of other things. But I think that the, think the idea that uh, we're going to make it by escaping or some other way, uh, made us stay alive. Now, Mike Swab then uh moved fortunately for me and for him I think, that when we move from camp to camp we always stick together. His number, uh that was tattooed on his arm was just a few away from me and which was given to us later, not in the first camps but when we moved to the subcamp of Auschwitz. And uh, we uh, the bond was even stronger because I felt also that he had lost his father, on my part at least, he doesn't have a father or brother, he is all by himself, and I still have my father. Although my

father did work in a different place, but at nighttime we saw each other in the barracks. And we were also able to help each other out by uh, for instance in this particular case, I had to hold the measuring equipment for a German _____ which is a, a surveyor of uh, uh, on a, a construction site, on a railroad site, you had what these guys they call mister _____, or _____, which is a supervisor and sometimes, because I spoke German, he left a piece of bread or something. And then I would take it back and share it with my friend Mike and my father or something. But there was a little help every once in a while if you were lucky and if you were maybe away from the big group which I was at times. And uh, when we were transferred to the other camp, with Mike Swab, of course, we teamed up, uh, filling lorries (ph), and they have a name for that, auch _____, which I don't know if there is a name in English, means in working, you fill your lorry and then if the others are finished, you can rest up. In other words, you don't have to fill another lorry (ph) because there are two people to each lorry. You throw the dirt in, and then _____ some other place, and you unload it, and you fill holes and so on. Or bunk craters or whatever we did there (mumbled). And uh, uh Mike and I were probably among the best team there was, uh, and the reward for being good was not food but it was ciga - one cigarette a day. These were Russian mahorka (ph) cigarettes which had been either captured or gotten from the Soviet Union; they weren't real tobacco, but to the smoker this was better than nothing. And there were people in the camps who would give their bread away instead of (mumble) rather not eat than smoke a cigarette. And that's how we traded. There was a trade going on among the people who were smokers and who rather would die smoking, not from cancer but from not eating, and would give a piece of their bread away just to have a TAPE ENDS ... that they, because they were's always the same, whether he was a uh, uh, a bad or good, shouldn't say good guy because there weren't many good guys, most of them were bad, but occasionally there was one who probably had regrets having joined the SS or, and we had one who actually spoke Yiddish, who apparently had lived with Jews. Some people suspected him maybe partly Jewish, but we never determined that and he disappeared later on. Maybe he was found out, but uh he did speak Yiddish. And uh, uh, it was also question of survival who your guard was that particular day. So if you were lucky maybe for many weeks you had the right guard. Somebody came along he just hated you for being able to speak German as well as he did. Or maybe better. If he was a guard who came from some territory _____ which are the uh, uh - I can't think of name right now - ethnic Germans, who were transported back into Germany, came from the Sudanan (ph) land. And some of these people did not speak so well German, so here you have a guard whose German was not so good, but a prisoner, a Jew, spoke better German than he did. And that was of course cause for taking it out on somebody, and, and that was very frequent, very frequent. But it didn't have to be the language, there were many other things this happened to. Pause. Uh, in the uh, digging up of bombs, uh, we were all so lucky. I'm speaking very frequently about luck because uh, the survival is part the luck, staying healthy and a, a number of other things. But the luck part was that in my team, this again I'm talking about teams (mumbled) in someplace you were work as team, a team of five people there were digging up bombs. We had an _____ form (ph) engineer, a Jew who knew how to defuse bombs, who learned it apparently in there, and in other teams which just had to be somebody in the team of five people to dig up bombs who had to defuse the bomb and some of them went off. So our case in a team that dug up the bombs, we had an

engineer that knew what he was doing and we never had an explosion. So again, luck. And uh, uh, what can, else can I contribute to, faith. Yes, I'll speak about that now. Uh, I came from a Jewish family which went to the synagogue on holidays, and on Sabbath evening, but not orthodox. We had a conservative synagogue in our town, the only one, and it was a city of about 800 Jews I believe. Middle class mostly, and uh, uh, I'm getting off the subject.

Q: MUMBLED -

A: Thank you. Things I think of I want to say, not about faith, but uh about how I met my wife later on. Uh, I married a, I married a non-Jewish woman, a German, but she comes from a non-Nazi family. I, I, _____ her uncle was the uh, president of the German Jewish Friendship Society, he was a former German professor, and he was the Senator for Cultural (ph) Education in West Berlin. Uh and, uh, so I, I knew this when I met her, and wanted to marry somebody as a friend of my did, a Jewish boy, a rabbi's son, who married a woman who comes from a big Nazi family, and the family didn't even want to have anything to do with them. But uh, uh, my wife wanted to become Jewish. I said for _____ you believe whatever you want to believe. That's the way I do. I'm not sure I believe everything that the Jew does - I believe what I want - that's the way I came out of the camps. And, uh, but my wife said _____ but my children are educated as Jews, but according to the law, they are not Jewish and I know that because their mother has to be Jewish. And to me this means absolutely nothing. My children feel as Jews, they're educated, they go to synagogue, some of them, not all. Like all the other Jewish kids too. But uh, they went to Jewish Sunday School for ten years, every one of them. They are always the top ones in their class, and so I have, don't have a problem with it. To me, conversion means nothing. I have seen so many people being converted by militant chap__ that didn't deserve to be converted. Just because, for the in-laws, or ...

Q: You were talking before about how your faith helped you.

A: Right. We're not on yet. We are on. Oh, I didn't know that, I didn't realize that. O.K. Anyway, I started talking about my faith. Now, I mentioned that I, uh, we belonged to conservative synagogue which was the only one in the town where we lived. And we had an outstanding rabbi there. Was quite impressive man. And so I had a good Jewish education. In Germany, in the, in the public school, you also get lessons of religion, and so the Jews are, just like here you may have to, but you do it here on a Sunday, or, or you don't do it in a public school, you go outside to your church to get religious lessons. But in Germany, it's part of the curriculum that once or twice or three times a week you have an hour on Judaism, or Catholicism or whatever. And so uh, I grew up, to make a long story short, to be with a solid Jewish education, a little Hebrew, and, but, I was not, neither was my father, very religious. My grandparents were, on one side. And uh, so, my faith, that I want to talk about, I lost towards the end of the war, my faith in God. I say how can there be a God, and I was not thinking about myself, or this was even before my father was killed. Uh, I lost my faith because I say how can God allow that little children and women be killed. And uh, I kept this for about a year after the war. And then I felt I came back not because somebody tried to convince me there is a god, all by myself I said

there has to be something superior, but I will never call him almighty again, because if he was almighty, he could have prevented that. So I don't believe that God is almighty. I do believe in architect of the universe, call him God, call him what you will, I do believe in God. But, uh, and my children believe in God. Uh, and I, these questions I have talked extensively, uh, to my children about and I told them they are free to believe whatever they want to. They grew up with a Jewish education, and the reason, I didn't point this out before, why I wanted to be Jewish and that was a question that uh, came up with, between me and my wife before we got married. I said, look, you are protestant and uh, I'm Jewish. Now, I am not very strong on Judaism, but the children, we have to decide when we have children, what they will be. So, I said whatever you want them to be is alright with me, and she said, I said, I don't feel either way. So I decided the children would be Jewish with the agreement of my wife, for one reason only. In the memory of my parents, because my parents had to die because they were Jews, and, in their memory, the children are going to be Jewish. If it had to be one way or another, it had to be some reason why they're one way or another. So my wife fully agreed. And my wife, after several years, wanted also to become Jewish, and I said this means nothing to me - it's a piece of paper. You'll continue living just the way we do now - it means nothing. And as far as the children, they can feel, they grew up with ten years of Jewish education and know all there is to know, and they can do whatever they want. And, uh, I give them that freedom, because I am not myself so strong on, on religion, but I do believe in God and it came back to me after the war. Because I really had a hard time for a long time, and while I was in the U.S. Army I had a very deep uh, talk with a Catholic chaplain. And, about faith, and he was the only man that ever admitted to me, the only preacher that said if he had experienced some of the things, we had many evenings together, that he had experienced some of the things that I talked to him about, that he wasn't sure he could still believe in God. And that comes from a Catholic priest in the Army. Anyway, that's, I mentioned religion. Uh, if religion is a strong support for people, I recommend religion, one or another religion, as long as you have some belief in something, in God, or in your fellow man. To me, I look at my parents as being godly. They were good people, they died, they had never done anything wrong, and to me that, I see God in them. And I can see God in other people, live people. They are good people. I see God in nature. So I can consider myself as believing in God, although at, for, for a while, for me about two years, I didn't believe in God. This was one year after the war. Uh, the belief to survive I talked about. O.K., one was religion or the belief in God. One was luck. Health was of utmost importance. Even if you had enough to eat didn't mean that you were able to survive. Because there were so many diseases. There was typhus in places. Diarrhe

- A: The worst enemy that I, that I have seen. Once you had it, you couldn't get rid of it. And, fortunately, in some of these camps, and I am getting back to the story later on more extensively, you had many Jewish doctors, who weren't allowed to practice medicine. There was no hospital, but who recommended certain ways of keeping yourself fit, even without, with little food. For instance, in the case of diarrhea, we took wood that was burned and ground it up and ate the ashes, uh, the coal actually. The coal, and that is one thing that will help you in preventing diarrhea, or if you have diarrhea maybe you can get rid of it. So from coal. So there were many very primitive ways that we used, or even chewing on a piece of wood. Just to kill the feeling of hunger. So, and, and, and like I

said the doctors were very helpful in those camps, even though they weren't allowed to practice, with that advice. And uh, so, uh, disease was the big killer and if you were able to survive that you were lucky. Now uh, while I'm thinking of it, my, uh when I escaped later on, my weight, I was uh put on the scale by the U.S. Army and was seventy-five pounds. I was a walking skeleton, but I was healthy. And that was my luck. Uh, just skin and bones, but walking and still fairly strong, and weighed seventy-five American pounds. And so was my friend Mike Schwab about the same. And we picked it up, about fifty pounds in six months, in three months. I'm sorry. But uh, from the smaller camps that I was talking about, we went to a larger camp which was called Blechhammer (ph) and this was an actual small concentration camp of about four thousand people. When I say concentration camp I must make the difference between a camp like Auschwitz, and this was a subcamp of Auschwitz. Auschwitz had something like I believe maybe a hundred subcamps, some smaller, some bigger, and this one four thousand people. And these subcamps were mainly used not for the destruction of people but for work people to death. That was the point in those camps. They were used for the German war effort in most cases. In this particular case, Blechhammer (ph) was a camp that was about I think maybe a hundred kilometers from Auschwitz, maybe less, I don't know exactly. And it had the largest German synthetic gas factory, which was several miles long, wide, and everyday we went to work in this factory. Now, the, the factory, the gasoline factory was being bombed once by American long-range bombers. And I must as a side-line state something. I was very upset for a long time when the question came up in the newspapers about the bombing of Auschwitz, that it couldn't be done. It was too far. Well, we were just, I would say within fifty miles of Auschwitz. And we were being bombed by American bombers, which was something happy event for us although some prisoners got killed, and in the factory, where we did also mostly construction work. We didn't actually participate in the operation of the factory. These were Germans or other foreigners. And they had also British prisoner of war camp nearby. Uh, the uh, uh, we were mainly used to clean up from the bombings. We built and built new bunkers where the Germans could hide. Now when the bombers came overhead, there were several bombing raids who dropped what they call, uh carpet bombings. That means releasing, a hundred planes releasing all the bombs at one time for effect. And they tried to destroy the factory in order to prevent the Germans from having gasoline to continue the war. Uh, the camp was, like I said, a work camp and not a camp with gas chambers. The people, and I didn't know this at the time, only when they came to my father which I'm going to talk about in a minute, the people were not destroyed in gas chambers there because that was done at Auschwitz. And we were there for one purpose, to work. We worked to death. The food was so so but compared to the previous camp it was a little better because they really needed us very badly there. But there was uh, one meal in the morning and one meal at night. And if you're lucky, there was some soup at lunch time at the place of work. And working hours were usually, and this was true for most of the camps, were anywhere from ten to twelve hours average day. And the facilities for hygiene were very poor. I didn't touch on that in the camps, and the common latrines and the people had diarrhea like I mentioned before and uh, and people would catch bugs one from one another. The water was someplace on, the cold water. And anyway, the Blechhammer (ph) camp uh was probably one of the more modern or well-kept camps because the camp commander and the Jew _____ which was the uh Jewish guy in

charge. One of the prisoners was not a copple (ph) which was so bad, but he was also was a winner of a German medal during the First World War and was somewhat respected by the SS. And he was a learned man and his name was Klemper, Kempor or Kemora (ph) was his name. And because of him I think uh, uh a lot of people, not a lot of people, but the, the lifestyle was somewhat more decent than in other places. Uh, we were not bothered too much while we were in the camp. We had to work. Uh, people were sometimes beaten to death. It was up to the local SS who guarded us. Or even to some of the German, uh, to the uh fuabata(ph) who were sometimes pretty bad guys who knew that it doesn't matter. You kill one prisoner they got replacement ones pretty quick. Now at Blechhammer, it was a replacement, uh, uh, the replacement worked this way. If a hundred prisoners, or two hundred or three hundred prisoners had died over a period of time, a short period of time, two or three hundred prisoners would come in from Auschwitz immediately, which wasn't very far away. So they could work people to death and then the bodies, I don't even know what they did with the bodies, whether they were taken to a crematorium in Auschwitz or not or whether they were taken care of locally. I really don't know that. But whenever there were prisoners missing, they just brought a couple hundred more. And this was true also in the last camp. Uh, exactly the same method of replenishment. Uh, with my father in, this happened in about uh, I don't know exactly but uh, November or so of 1944. My father became very weak. Uh, was also like a skeleton and uh, he was reaching the age of 50. He was going to have, and uh, at that time there was unwritten rule, and I've checked it out after the war, this, there was someplace there was something in writing, and someplace there was nothing, I don't know the ____ it was ____, but it was an accepted fact that any Jew or any worker, non-Jewish, who worked in these labor camps, uh, who reached the age of 50 was not good enough for the war effort of Germany. Therefore, he was disposed of. Disposal meant gas chamber if they have one. In our case Auschwitz was nearby. So what they did ever once in a while, they picked up the people. Some people said I can't, I'm weak. Well the SS picked them out or they picked out older people. But there was always a group of people that was sent back from Blechhammer to Auschwitz by truck. But whoever reached the age of was automatically put in that group, to be disposed of. Well, what they said just for fun, they said we sending them to rest and recreation because they worked so hard. They needed to rest. But what it really meant and we knew that not officially but the rumors were they was being sent to Auschwitz to the gas chamber. And that is exactly what happened to my father. I came back from work one day. My father wasn't there and didn't come back, and I was, where is my father, trying to find out frantically. Well, he was in a special enclosure within the camp, a barbed wire enclosure with one barracks where they assembled those people. They referred to it as the dispensary but it wasn't a dispensary - it was just a gob of people and sent them away in a couple of days or whatever. Well, I saw my father one more time through the barbed wire and it was nothing I could do and nothing he could do. And I could only hope for the best, not wanting to be true it is the gas chamber at the other end, but it was. And so I know the exact fate of my father. Uh, he was taken from Blechhammer to Auschwitz and gassed and disposed of. And, which also happened to be the fate of my father, of my mother, uh, but in 1942 already. And uh, so when I was alone, I still had by friend Mike Swab, which was something great to have, to have uh somebody to lean on and he can lean on you. And we decided from then more than ever that the first chance we get we're going to escape. And we worked together, but

it was almost impossible. The, the concentration camp had very high walls. They were made from concrete slabs, and on top of the wall of this particular camp was electrically loaded barbed wire. There was no way to get out. And it was well controlled with guard towers. And being marched to work everyday, which was several miles, there was no way to escape either. There were SS with machine pistols and dogs on each side. The only place where it would have been possible to escape was at the work site. If you worked in a separate group like I did, I did sometimes. But when I worked in a separate group, Mike Swab didn't work in a separate group. And our plan, plan was that if we can escape it should be in a group. Some of us might be shot in the process of escaping, if it is found out, but some of us might get through. So it always better in a group, then split up once you're outside. O.K. Uh, we had at that time planned if we get away from the factory, but then was, once you get, we had blue/white stripped uniforms, and what, what do you do when you escape. You're in the middle of Germany or some place or Polish border or something. My idea was to get to my German friends, this Catholic family by the name of Sonnon (ph) in Muchenglablak (ph), whose parents were friends of my parents, to get to the house and then to survive the war in their cellar. And I am sure they would have done it because they helped my grandparents till they were deported to Joasenchat (ph) in 1941. And uh, uh, so Mike Schwab was going to go along with me. Either that or we go to Holland. But he wasn't sure where he would go to in Holland. I was sure where I would go to in Germany, so we decided it would be Germany. But then the question was, once you escape, a tattooed number on the arm and uh hair shorn. In other words, you looked like a prisoner. And blue/white stripped uniforms that you could throw away if you had other clothes, but you still looked like a prisoner with no hair and looking like a skeleton, you were immediately recognized, so where you going to go. So even if you had a chance to escape, and the chances were there frankly, at the place of work, in, in the synthetic gasoline factory. There were many chances. And some people did escape, but they were all caught. And when they were caught, they were brought back to camp and hung whether they were dead or not dead. They were hung or put on the ground for all the prisoners to see. Here's what happened. Some of them were shot and the bodies, the mutilated bodies, sometimes were just put in front of the prisoners before uh going to work in the morning so everybody could see it. They were left out all day, all night, you know, so everybody could see what happens to one who escapes. And that was standard procedure - to bring them back to the camp and let all the prisoners see what happens to an escapee. Well, uh, I have one other incident at Blesheimer. Uh, I got hit by machine gun fire. There was when a group was accused of sabotaging the German war effort and some people were, in this, this was a common, not very common, but occasionally some people were accused of not working hard enough, to sabotage the German war effort. In other cases, where three people were hung at Blesheimer; they were accused of sabotaging the war effort by cutting telephone lines. But what they had done, they had done clean-up work where bombs had fallen and some of the prisoners had taken some wire, some electric wire and used them as belts on their pants because we didn't have any belts. And they were caught and they were accused of having cut the wire and they were hanged publically in front of the group of, the whole camp being assembled. In, in my case, our group was accused of not working too hard and made an example, and, and the SS started firing like a mass execution. And one of our plans that Mike and I had was also which we had learned from other people, the thing to do to get

out of something, if there is not a planned execution where they just make sure everybody is dead, _____, to drop the moment they start firing, to drop down, and let a body fall over you. And then be covered up. And maybe be left for dead. And that is exactly what I did. But, uh in this particular case, the SS came, apparently they had no intention of maybe having a mass execution but just fire into some prisoners because somebody got angry, or was upset about something, not performing enough work that they, uh whatever the reason was which could be many reasons. They just started firing. The reason as far as I know was that we didn't perform at work. And so I was hit. Now, my luck was I got out of it and that's another long story and I don't think we have time for that to go into that. I got out of this alive by getting up later on, going back to the barracks and being treated by a prisoner doctor. Now there was no place that I could go to a hospital. I was scrapped (ph) several times, three or four times on my head, and right here, and here, and the hair never grew back and there was a piece of bone missing, but luckily I was, I was a pretty good healer and although I did have puss in it I was healed by this doctor. And uh with normal thread being used for sewing on buttons uh to fix me up and, and like I said there was no hospital or dispensary I could go to. Well, next day I had to go to work. There was no place to rest up or after loss of blood and so on. Uh, and I was asked since I was bloody and had a bandage around my head, not regular bandage but some old clothing, what happened. And I said I got hit during the air raid. And many prisoners were either killed or hurt pretty badly at Blesheimer during the air raids, the bombings of the synthetic gasoline factory. And then prisoners were walked back. Some days they were lucky - they got some bandage from the local German workers. From the SS we got nothing. From the local German workers, which were also hit sometimes. So, and when you walked down in the morning people would say, hey you, you fit to work. You say yes, I'm fit to work. I looked very strong even though you had lost some blood you would be really weak, but that was always the thing during the selection process that went through several times. So even if you were, don't come walking up there like you weak, almost falling over, which was the case in most cases and in my case sometimes too but I never let anybody see that I was weak and just looked straight and strong when you went through selection line. Well, when I walked out that morning, it wasn't a selection line, it was just the guys going out, the guy pointed me out and I said I was hit during the bombardment and he passed me. So that's how I was able to survive that. Uh, Blesheimer after my father, did exist and I don't have my exact dates. Till December of 1944 when the Russians advanced. At that time, uh the uh order was given to evacuate the camps. We could already hear the sound of war by hearing guns, artillery, tanks or whatever, bombings. And the word we got and we were always a little bit in the dark since officially we got no word at all what was going in the outside world, but occassionally somebody would get a newspaper which was sometimes in some cases punishable by death, depending on how the SS felt. You know, somebody could bring a paper back to camp or having a radio which I don't know if anyone had, but uh, we were able to find some old newspapers maybe at place of work somebody had thrown away and so we were sort of informed. But that was the German side that we were reading. Uh, in this particular case, I uh, we heard the guns and the rumor came we going to be evacuated. Uh, where to nobody knew. Into Germany. Away from the front. That wasn't to do us a favor, to get us away from the firing, but because they needed more labor inside Germany. And they had to get it from somewhere. And I think, I'm not sure, that

Auschwitz was already captured at that time or not. I have no knowledge of that. But they were getting close to Auschwitz too, and Auschwitz I don't think made any death marches. People were just left in there or killed or whatever. But in this particular labor camp that we were in, or subcamp of Auschwitz, we were evacuated. This was the plan I assume, and in an orderly manner we were marched every day, all day and in the night time put in a field with lights away from the front towards Germany. And we finally arrived. When somebody couldn't walk because the food, there was almost no food, days, we went for days without food. Water we got once in a while. And I assume, I don't have any specific figure, that we were about four thousand or somewhere close to four thousand prisoners that were marched out of the camp. Some people remained behind, and there were other people in other camps that I read up after the war, that came to the camp. They had to put them somewhere. People who had been marched into this camp from other camps when we were out already. They didn't know what to do with them, the Russians were advancing too fast, and uh, so I don't have any exact figures. It was very confusing times but I assume about four thousand prisoners were marched out of Blesheimer. Fourteen days later, the death march arrived at the camp of Gross Rosen which was another large, larger concentration camp. And in the group that I was in, we were standing in mud being counted, and I was standing in the front row being able to understand German, being able to understand the SS was reporting to his superior. He was delivering 276 prisoners. Now, I can't say to this day if that is what was left of four thousand. I don't know how many got there. I don't know how many were killed every day. But what one of the common things they did was put END OF TAPE barns from farmers. Whenever they could they usually put maybe about five hundred prisoners to a barn. They would lock them up in the barn. This was for proper control so nobody could run away during the night. If they had you out in the open, that meant they have lights on and they couldn't go to sleep. But if they could lock you up in a barn, they just have to post two or three guards around and the rest of them could go to sleep. And the prisoners were locked up. Uh, so I don't know how many people were executed in barns because there were a lot of executions going on and everyday, every morning before mein dof (ph) they said who cannot march any more, and people would say I can, I can, but they were just dragging themselves on the ground. They would shoot them by the side of the road. They would just pile them up and fire into the group. The regular mass executions. They make sure nobody is left behind. They even went so far to make it easy, I don't know what they tried to do, they picked cemeteries to execute people, next to cemeteries. Maybe they thought they ought to get buried in a cemetery. I don't know why but it is very odd. But in two cases, I've seen people be executed near cemeteries, next to cemeteries. Uh, so from Gross Rosen, the 276 prisoners plus other prisoners that were at Gross Rosen, were transported in cattle cars to Buchenwald. This was a few days later. Buchenwald was of course well inside Germany, was on the western front. Here we're coming from the eastern front to the western front. And we arrived at Buchenwald, we didn't arrive, we arrived near the city of Weimar, which is rather large city, on the track leading through the city of Weimar to the other side of, to Buchenwald. And uh we were very unfortunate. The train must have been spotted by air, by airplanes, and I don't know whether they were British or American airplanes, uh, but the train was bombed. The train was stationary at that time, the engine was stopped. But it was just outside the city of Weimar before getting to Buchenwald, and when the city was bombed, our car was hit

and split open. Some people were killed. But neither Michael or I were hit at all, probably covered by others, and we got out of the car, and this was near some German homes. Now, we knew we were hungry, we were starved because we hadn't gotten any food from the time we left Gross Rosen in the cattle cars. Uh, we went into a house, it was the nearest house where the car was. It was near the railroad tracks and went in the kitchen and helped ourselves. The inhabitants of this house were sitting in the cellar, because the bombing was still going on. And the clear wasn't given. The moment the all clear was given we had our parkas full of food and we had eaten quite a bit while we were stuffing ourselves, or loading up with food. And many prisoners did that. Those that were caught were shot by the SS. We didn't get caught because that was uh, taboo, of course, going into German homes and grabbing food. But again there was no way to escape. At that time it would have been very easy to escape during the bombing. Where to go? Hair shorn off, number on the arm, and blue/white stripped uniforms. No place to go. No. And it was so easy to escape at that time. Well, I don't know how many survived the, uh, this bombing but the rest of us finally arrived at Buchenwald. Being in Buchenwald, we thought this was going to be the end now. They're not going to take us anymore. Apparently they didn't know which way to go, from the east to the west, from the west to the east. The Americans were coming the other way, so, and there were selection processes at Buchenwald. And I didn't mention the selection processes before, but I went through several selection processes. Some of them were more formal than others, and others were just when you went to work guys were picked out and you stayed behind. You were not strong enough anymore or you go. But this was a regular selection process, where to we didn't know at the time. Uh, and again, Mike and I went to the right side, looking strong and fit, and even asked the questions, are you strong and do you speak German? Yes. Now, O.K. So we had no idea where we were being shipped off to, but we were given shots at that time. I am coming back to that in a minute. What worried me long after the war. Uh, there was apparently typhus, and we had heard of sterilization. In many camps there they had experimented with sterilization and in some cases people were sterilized just for the sake of sterilization and in other places it was just for experimentation. And I had thought that at Buchenwald before going to the next camp of Leigenstein-Zwieberge (ph), that I had maybe been sterilized. I didn't know what sterilization involved. It's not just giving somebody a shot, but for a long, for about a year after the war, I never wanted to face the question but I thought maybe I had been sterilized. But it turned out that I never was sterilized because we have six children, so I was safe on that point. But for a long time it was on my mind, and the only thing that I could find out that we were given shots against typhus and some other things, which was prevalent at the time and they wanted healthy workers, healthy as they could possibly be, at least not have a disease that kills everyone in the room. From Buchenwald then we uh, from Buchenwald we were transported to the camp of Leigenstein- Zwieberge (ph) which was a subcamp of Buchenwald, a forced labor camp. And it was hidden in the Harz Mountains. But we didn't know at the time that it was a secret project of the SS where they were building tunnels into the Harz Mountains. Their was Mauthausen (ph) which is a more famous camp on the other end of the Harz Mountains and we were at the lower end of the Harz Mountains, building tunnels to construct the V-2, the flying bomb or like we have seen in the Smithsonian Museum here. Uh, the V-2 was the secret weapon of Hitler, and the only way they could produce any was underground because of the

bombing. So they had picked the Harz Mountains to construct a factory underneath. Now at the end where we were, there was no factory. The factory was operating up north, but we were constructing the second project, and the job consisted of being marched from work everyday from this camp which was also about four thousand people, and which was a very mixed camp. The Jews were a minority in there. The camp was practically led by communist prisoners, German communists, who had been there, the first ones in the camp. Another group, there was a replenishment group and they were pretty well organized. But the camp was a terrible camp, was a temporary camp. The camp had existed, by the time I got there, only about four months or five months, so it was a brand new camp so it was only going to be there for the purpose of constructing these tunnels. Uh, the march to the tunnels was very tedious every day, and almost no food. And again the replenishment method was five hundred people from Buchenwald. Uh, each time five hundred people were dead, five hundred people, and they were thrown in mass graves. There was no burning of bodies and I worked on one of the mass graves, I was detailed to that for a short while and fortunately only doing one thing, digging the hole. And today there are out of seven thousand prisoners who were totally there, for the normal amount of prisoners was four thousand, but there were three additional thousand that came to replenish. So then all of them in mass graves near the camp. There is a site - I never went back there although I have a standing invitation from the East German government to come back and be their guest - that they know of me as the only survivor who lives in the western world. And uh so the camp is still in existence, a national monument, and young soldiers, East German, are being sworn in at the camp. But it is one of the worst camps that existed. So the mass graves are there. They have a very nice site. They send me pictures every year, and the story exists although I do believe that uh, uh, that maybe the story is not complete. It is probably worse than if you actually read this. It is not the same thing if somebody tells you about it is my opinion. You cannot picture this. You cannot picture going hungry. Sometimes I think if you tell someone what hungry is like. But in Lichtenstein, the work was the killing method of people. By that I mean working in tunnels without the proper protection. You had to dig, get the rocks out, haul them on lorries out or carry them out. And then the blasting. They never had the prisoners far enough away that somebody wouldn't get killed by the dynamite blasting and then they would carry the rocks off. So the German guards, the SS guards always stood far enough away so they wouldn't get hit, but they didn't let the prisoners get out far enough to be safe from the blasting, so many people were killed. And those people had to be carried back at night and put into the mass graves. You know, thrown in. And I also must mention one horrible thing. At the camp at Leichenstein, they buried many people who were alive. People who were too weak, who couldn't get off their knees anymore, to get up, to stand up to go to work, and they were put in a pile with the dead people and buried. At one time somebody refused to bury after they were all thrown in, a few live people were still moving. He had recognized somebody that he knew and refused to throw earth on him and the man was shot at the mass grave. That happened to Leichenstein. And uh, there are many stories, too many of them to tell because it was by far the worst camp that I existed in, and was the least known camps because it was a secret project. Now, when I mentioned it contained a secret project, this I also read up after the war although there was something known about it, something special about this camp. It was like a lot of rumors were circulating all the time. It was a common rumor which turned out to be true

after I read up on it that the order from the SS was that in case of, there wouldn't be no evacuation of the camp in case the Americans come. All prisoners have to be killed, no survivors. Because it was considered a secret project which they were building a special factory. Now, uh, while we were working in the tunnels, there were German engineers in there. I was able to get to one and ask him what he would do with his torn clothing. Every once in a while he would take something off that was torn or bring it back and even some of them would give it to the prisoners because we were always cold. First of all, it was freezing in there. Uh, I'm talking about the beginning of 1945, the mid-winter, when we started there. And I asked this German engineer if he has any old clothing he could bring in that we could wear under our prisoner blue/white striped uniform and he said yes he would. And I said I have a friend too, and I said he would bring in some warm clothing. So he was one of the good guys. And we were able to pick up this clothing. He left it in a certain place, we picked it up. And the main reason for this clothing was not to be warm. That too, but the main reason was to be able to escape. We figured this is one camp we will never get out of if the war lasts any longer and we had no idea in January or February how long the war was going to last. And we say if we did well so far, we are not going to do well here because no way. And there was killing by working people to death. That was all, and beating to death.

Q: I just want to ask you

A: Yes, this was one of the camps where Mike was working in another place, but at night time we were together in the barracks. Uh, the specific story that I can tell, there are really too many, but is how we were put in the barracks, just lined up like sardines. There was not enough place to sleep, for everybody to stretch out. There were no double bunks. It was just the plain floor of the barracks I was in. But apparently the camp was created for a lot less people and then there are four thousand people and maybe the camp was created for a thousand people. I don't know. I would say so. But then the people just stretch out on all these barrack floors. And uh, at night time when people would come back from work in the dark, there would be no light on. People would fight and actually strangle each other, become like animals, just to get a place to sleep. And we were attacked many times, but Mike and I, we always stood together and we defended ourselves, just for having a place to sleep. It was terrible. People were just like animals and there were people who went to the pile up place where there were bodies and thought they could cut out a piece of meat. And they were caught. And some would be severely punished for doing that. These peoples were considered inhuman, but they were crazed from hunger, some of these people. And particularly when somebody was left in the barracks of a couple of days, too weak to go to work, and it would be the end after a few days anyway and people would die. And like I said, they grabbed some of these people and buried them alive. They didn't even pile them up anymore outside, just took them directly to the mass grave. And each mass grave at Leigenberg-Zwieberge (ph) has five hundred people and I believe there were six of them. Uh, now, the story in the barracks, this is one of my most vivid memories of all the camps, is that overhead, these were just one floor barracks, and we sleep on the floor. There were rafters overhead holding the roof together, and every morning as we got up there would be people hanging. Every morning, in every barracks. Because people knew they were not going to survive and any

day, and might as well die now instead of living a few more days, a few more weeks. Well, lucky for Mike and me, we didn't feel that way. We figure it's got to be the end. We're going to survive. We have to. And, uh, maybe they're going to evacuate us you know. We also hear that the Allies are coming closer, but we were just .. And we teamed with four other guys at that time who also had the same ideas. They were all about our age and they were all making it sort of, like we did, being able to stand up on their own two legs. And we said, we shall escape together. And they also had gotten civilian clothes like we did from some other place they were working, they were wearing underneath their blue/white stripped uniforms. And, uh, so we said, well we'll try and escape and then we go in different directions, maybe two one way, two another way, maybe one SS guard is firing, maybe he'll hit some of us, maybe he won't hit anybody. But some of us will get out. But we always noticed that if one person would escape they would always hit him, by submachine gun fire. Automatic fire. So we had that in mind. We always stuck together. And said if it comes to an evacuation we won't be on a death march like the one from the eastern front that we will never survive, because we know what happened there. And we should escape then from the march because that would be towards the end anyway from _____. Uh, coming back to the people that were hanging themselves. It was our job every morning before going outside for report period, people would be counted - how many are still alive, how many are still there - that we had to take those bodies down from the rafters. And pile them outside the barracks, and then another group would come and pick them up and take them to the mass graves. Uh, my, if I, for years, and I still do occasionally, there wasn't a night, and I, like I mentioned, I have a large family so my family gets my mind off these things and I have a very normal life. I have had after the war, or soon after I get married it was more normal than ever. Uh, for years, when I had dreams it was about escaping, escaping. Because it was always on our minds, escaping. Whenever I had a dream, even today when I am sometimes, probably tonight I'll have one, I will dream about escaping. It was a standard thing. And that is what kept me alive. That's what kept Michael Schwab (ph) alive, you know. And, but the other dream that is more frequent than any dream about the concentration camp, is about the people hanging themselves. There is nothing more vivid in my mind than seeing those people taking their own lives. It was bad enough, somebody else taking your life, or mass execution, but people just giving up, just plain giving up. And I have had occasions, and I don't do this anymore since I know what my problem is, that I watered the lawn one day at my home, and my pants were very wet, and I hung up the pants in the shower, and the pants were just hanging there, and I got up during the night and that's nothing. When I have a bad dream, and I walked into where the toilet is and I saw these pants hanging and immediately I thought somebody was hanging there. And, uh, like suicides are, is one of the worst memories I have, because so many people committed suicide. Not just by rafters. We had people, and my thoughts have been divided on that - whether it was a courageous act or a coward's act, I'm not judging people when they commit suicide. I would never do it. Uh, I would feel, I get through things. And uh, although, given thought, yes, I must admit I've given it thought. I think everyone who has been in concentration camp has given thought to suicide. But uh, I have seen a man commit suicide why I thought it was a courageous act. When he stood in front, when we were repairing a railway, and the second line (ph) a speed train came by and he just went in front of the train and he stood there facing it and he got run over by the train. It killed

him. And I, you know, there were many other ways. We tried to prevent suicides, but that is a shameful thing in my opinion. On my own part, the only thing I would help somebody that wants to die, let them die if they want to die. That's an old man that I saw had cut his wrists, and I shouted because there was blood spurting from his wrists, and we made a tourniquet, bandaged him up and he was taken back to camp and he was beaten up savagely and he was killed that night for trying to deprive the German state of labor. And that was the sentence on this guy. You couldn't even commit suicide - that was against the law to commit suicide. And that man would have been much better off dying on the ground where I found him, at work. And uh, so, from then on my idea was about suicide, if somebody wants to do it, let them do it. Now, if it would have been somebody close to me it would have been a different story. Like if my friend Mike Schwab would have done it, I would have tried to talk him out of it. But I knew that he, that just a momentary thing, it is not something he believes in. I think a lot of people think about it for a long time before they do it. Or they do it on short notice. They say all of a sudden, whatever. Well, uh, these are some of the incidents, and Lagenstein was probably the worst camp and the worst memories I have. Everything goes into the background when I think about Langenstein. And uh, we were also the first time, I didn't mention this, this was also common practice, when you did something you weren't supposed to be doing, or they just wanted to get to you somehow, you got beatings. Officially, not just being hit, but being laid over what they called the bok (ph), which is like a special chair for beatings, and they would lash you. Mike and I both got caught one time, hiding, trying to get out of some work, and we got special beating. But we were strong and we were able to survive it, although Mike got the worst of it and on your bare rear and I got hit, by other prisoners - they had to do this, the SS didn't do this, just counted and stood by - but my guard left for a while because he wanted to get some cigarettes. And so the prisoner didn't beat me as hard as he should have, and he told me to shout real loud, to scream. And I did, so I didn't get a very hard beating. It was fifty lashes and my friend Mike got fifty full, and his posterior was bleeding and pussy for a long, long time. There was nothing to treat him with. So this was common place. Not only at Langenstein but in other places too. But Lagenstein was the worst. So I am coming to the next and the last story I think. My escape.

Q: _____

A: O. K. We're off now.

Q: _____

A: O.K. that gives me, that's good, that gives me a couple of minutes - I wanted to tell that from beginning to end without..

Q: _____ talk about _____

A: Well, I didn't want to tell that story. Sucking it out, somebody, the doctor sucking it out with the mouth and then swished his mouth in water, with warm water. We did have some warm water.

Q: _____

A: Yes, and I'm a good healer. I heal, I get something or I don't develop infection so fast.

Q: _____ Those are the questions that I have.

A: Well, my daughter asked me yesterday, she knows I'm coming over. We have three boys and three girls. Uh, why don't you write your story. After this, I divorce myself from all these stories. I can't sleep. Occassionally I did it because my children went to that high school, I talked at the high school. Tell me when we're on. In Falls Church, George Mason High School in Falls Church. Are we on already?

Q: No.

A: Uh, I have talked. We are on?

Q: I just want to come back to the story of your escape. _____

A: O.K. We knew the Allies were approaching. And in this case the American Army. That was more or less known. Uh, some people overheard the SS - they were talking the Americans are coming. O.K. What's the next thing. The order was to evacuate the prisoners, but nobody knew where. So Mike and I made up our mind, the other four guys, we're going to escape. The first march that we make, the first night or the second or third or whenever we can, we're not going to last for fourteen days. But, as they transported us, we went out in groups of five hundred people, and the SS did that for a purpose. I didn't know that at the time. We thought it was for better control. Instead of having a large group of four thousand prisoners, or three thousand five hundred together in one group, if there is a mass escape, they cannot kill everybody. So they took groups of five hundred people each. And we thought that was for better control. Have the guards around, and some of them with dogs. I think each group had about one or two police dogs, German Shepherds, and they were pretty vicious. And I didn't even tell any story about the dogs. Cough. Uh, when we were marched out in groups of five hundred, we thought it was for control purpose and the order was to march prisoners at night so the population wouldn't see us, and to sleep them and rest during the day, because the SS had to rest to. But we walked out and we were walking towards the tunnels, and then we were redirected. Now this I found later. I didn't know all this at the time. Because from the publication that the East Germans sent me, what actually happened. The order, and this I found out after the war, I didn't know this at the time, the order was to take the groups of prisoners, in group of five hundred, in different tunnels and dynamite the tunnels and bury the prisoners alive in there, so there would be no survivors. Because the order was no survivors from that particular secret project. If they shoot them, yes, they could have done it. But easier to drive them to the tunnels, which was just a few miles away, and dynamite the tunnels alive. But as it turned out, they were in radio contact with their former observers, or troops, or whatever. Uh, there was American tank column cited coming around the mountain. And they were looking for the tunnels. They knew there was something secret

going on because they are trying to find the tunnels by air one time because we were there and there was air alarm, and a torpedo plane and tried to put a torpedo into the tunnel. It was not successful. It was all camouflaged. Uh, they redirected us because they thought the American tank column was going to cut us off before they get to the tunnels. So we marched back. We marched _____ to camp, and then we marched, to make a long story short, we marched three nights till we actually escaped. And what happened, every night, they parked us, let us rest in a barn, just like in the first march. During the day, they took, they requisitioned a barn from a farmer. Since we were only five hundred people and they could put five hundred people in almost any barns, squeeze them in if it's a small barn, and then, bring us out at night. Now, if the farmer was a decent guy, he had some potatoes and food for the prisoners. Even for five hundred because he's feeding cows and other animals. So in the first and second night we got some food from the farmer, it was the only thing, and water. In the night time, they put the prisoners, of course, into these barns and they posted guards outside. The next morning, march again. Whoever couldn't march was shot by the SS - the same system like the other. So, again, we were prepared at that time - we were wearing our civilian clothes underneath and we said we've got to go the first chance we get. So on the third night, we had just, we had decided if we had crossed several small bridges or small streams or rivers, we have to get across the river because, we could all swim, we knew that. And we had decided after crossing a bridge would be the most opportune moment to escape and then go towards, or swim across because a dog would pursue you on land. But a dog would not swim across the river unless he is trained to do so. But the concentration camps' dogs I don't think were trained to go into water. They were trained to pursue prisoners on land. So we decided that ours, and then he would not, he could not smell, dogs cannot smell across water but they can smell across land, so they can follow you. If they turn the dog loose. Well what happened then, on the third night we had just come across a small bridge. We didn't know where we were. We were getting away from the American front, that's all we knew. Where to nobody knew. And I don't think, the SS were just trying to get us away because they didn't know what to do, and I think there must have been a dissention among them whether to kill or not to kill the prisoners. And I think one case I heard that a SS tried to make contact with the prisoners, that he was a good guy, that they should say so in case the Americans come. So maybe some of them were O.K. and some of them were not, and some were just scared and maybe _____ the troop transports on the roads and they were particularly following roads. And that's where all the transportation. As we came across a small river there was an air alert, and it was normal procedure, as we were walking in ranks of four, with the SS on the side on a small country road, a body seen from the air, and by that I mean at night time, signled airplanes who would be the observation plane . . . TAPE ENDS . . . and prisoners escaped and this happened and they got shot. When planes were not around, they put the searchlights on and sent the dog after them, or they would shoot the prisoner and they couldn't run so fast, you know, and _____. So there were several, there were, a matter of fact, quite a few escapes but everyone of them would get caught, so we thought that the time to escape was near a small river if we were lucky and we had lucky a plan overhead, just above where we were going to go. So we were lying down and we knew that were going to be no searchlight on and we took off. All six of us said go, and we went. And we must have been just a couple of hundred yards away from the river and one dog that decided the last moment's enough for us. I got

bitten by the dog in my leg, and I didn't even feel it. I didn't even know I was bitten. I thought, I fell a couple of times, but the dog, you cannot see as well, but the dog went after the other prisoners, and I don't know to this date - I never found out the story - but only Mike and I made it. The others went in different directions, like I said. That was our plan, to go in different directions and some of us get through. Either some of these people are killed by the dog, but we didn't see anybody and we inquired a little bit about it later on after our liberation, but they didn't know of any other prisoners that escaped. They knew, because we were reported by the SS to the local police, there are two escaped prisoners. So I assume that the other four were killed and they found them. But Mike and I got to the river, and we swam across, and then we were safe from the SS, from the dog, and the first thing we did, we figure if we stay out in the open, we're sunk. They maybe come with a local police dog and sniff us out. And we didn't smell so good and uh, we were full of lice and I mean, even with our civilian clothes on, I had a black jacket on, the white lice were just running around on the suit. And anybody would have recognized somebody coming from a concentration camp. But anyway, the first thing we did we went to some, there were some farmhouse nearby, and like I said it was at night and I don't remember what time it was but it must have been past midnight, maybe two or three in the morning and people would be asleep. So we decided we have to get off the roads, off the land where somebody could find us the next morning and hid someplace where it is safe, but not out in the open. So we got to a farmhouse and we found a window next to the, where the stable is. Underneath the stable there is, this was a solid build, brick stable. And underneath the stable they had a cellar, and this was a cellar for the foods for the animals, and also the potatoe cellar. They store hugh amount of potatoes in Germany, and we decided to get in through the cellar hole which was from the outside, not going through the front. When we lifted it up, I let myself down. We didn't know what we would hit in the dark, whether it would be some water or something. We were scared. And Michael was holding on to my arms, and I said there must be something below me. It smells like maybe potatoes, I wasn't sure you know. And I guess right, I didn't know. I figured it was potatoes, and then he let me go, and maybe about a couple inches below my feet I hit potatoes. But I was afraid that I wouldn't get out anymore if I let myself drop or whatever in the dark, and you don't know what is going on. So anyway, Michael came in and then we dug a hole in the potatoes so we figured in the morning somebody might open up the door to the potatoe cellar, we'd be sitting right on top of the potatoes sleeping or something. So we dug a hole into the potatoes, covered us up with potatoes, and there was enough air to get in of course, that was no problem, until we knew the next day where we were and what we could do. So we got out the next day when everything was quiet, the next evening when it started getting dark, and we stayed there a full day, and of course were not found. And then we went into, we got some milk to drink. We went into the stable. We found some milk. I think it was put there for the cats. They had a lot of cats. We drank the milk from the cats and we got food that was for the cows, and we took and filled out pocket up with potatoes. We ate raw potatoes, that didn't, but we were worried about diarrhea, of course. Anything raw. But we got our first real food, and then we went our way. Uh, we decided that to use the same routine, to sleep during the day, in bushes, but get away from the villages now, and uh, to go towards the sound of the artillery fire that was coming closer and closer. We didn't know which direction. We didn't know which uh way should we get away. Where we would go? Would be another

village in front of us or not. But we wanted to get away from villages, uh, because that's where most people were and we would be recognized possibly. Uh, what we did then is sleep in bushes during the day near some field or someplace and then march at night toward the sound of fire. And that took us seven days. And there is another little story but I think it is so long, un incidents along the way, but anyway. We came to a village . .

Q: We have plenty of time.

A: We have plenty of time. O.K. We had the most fantastic thing happen. I think you have to have, you have to be lucky. I keep stressing that, not just do some thinking, but also be lucky and healthy. On the sixth day or so, it was just a day or two before our actual liberation, we were sleeping in bushes. Actually one was supposed to be watching, one was supposed to be sleeping. I was supposed to be sleeping, Mike was supposed to be watching. And, but watching would not have helped very much except somebody's coming and they couldn't run away and then somebody would know. But we could kill one person. We decided if somebody is getting dangerous and tells us to come along with them or something that we would strangle the person. We knew we could do it. We had absolutely made up our mind that's what we would do. But we were both asleep and being awakened by jack boots. Now jack boots was what the SS wore, but he was the local policeman. There must have been only one policeman in that little village. And uh, he said, identification, he said in German. And we said, well we are foreign workers, we are from Holland we said. And Michael started talking Dutch a little bit and I spoke Dutch of course too, and we started mixing our German with a little Dutch. And he said I want to see papers. We don't have any papers. He said where are your papers. I said we've been bombed out. When we came back from the fields from work, we were foreign workers here, the place wasn't there anymore. Everything just what we're wearing to work - that's what we have, no more papers. And he started looking at us and he started going like this, He saw the lice crawling around. You know, stay away. Then he said, mitcom, come with me. I said oh my God, the SS, where to. Well he said, and he seemed to be inebriated a little bit. He had just had a couple of drinks, beers probably, you know. And the war was coming to an end, and things were pretty confusing. And we could smell the alcohol on him, and figured well, this man is maybe not dangerous but we don't want to anywhere. What are we doing to do? He had a pistol in his holster, and I said we can grab it and kill him but then somebody is really going to come looking for us, and maybe we can't get that far away. Everybody be alerted or something. So we figure, we noticed that the man was not decent, but he was scared. And he said at the end, he made a comment to it, well he said I have to take you because there are some escaped prisoners in this are

A: And we figured I said are we going to get there. Well, he said if you, if we can identify you, he said you can get some temporary papers because a lot of people have lost their papers because of bombings. They came home - no more homes. But I cannot let you go. So I said to Michael, I looked at him and I said, what do we do. I said, kill him? You know, we had a little sign. But we couldn't say anything, you know. We could just look at each other and try to understand each other through eye movements, and we could see this guy wasn't really all there. He was, as a matter of fact, he was about, I was going to

say an old man. He was my age or older. And, uh, so I said well, let's try it. Maybe we're lucky. And, we can't, maybe we're, somebody's going to find out about us here in the open anyway. If he lets us go now maybe then send a search house party for us or let's go. So he took us to city hall. The city hall was just a part-time job for - it was a full time job for the policeman - part-time job for the mayor who was a farmer, and he was burning papers. We came in there and he had a stove burning papers. And he said in German, or course, we couldn't understand everything, he said I pick up some Dutch workers here. When he said that I felt pretty secure you know. And he said they lost there papers in a bombing raid. Uh, can we give them some papers? Ah, he said, _____, what's the use, the war is finished. He said who cares about papers the mayor said you know. And he didn't want to have anything to do with anybody. And he looked at us and he said to us, and the guy, the policeman went in the next room to make a phone call or to do something. I didn't know what he was doing, but he left for a second. He said to us, the mayor, we have some concentration camp escapees in here, so we are being careful you know. He looked at us like he knew we were. And we figured he's not going to do anything. So we said, well, the policeman came back in, and he said, get rid of them. I don't want to have anything to do with them. And he said, well, I said, we have to get some, and then we started getting frantic (ph), and said give us some paper please. I said that you know we lost our papers in a bombing. Well I said, I can't give you any paper. There is nothing you can prove, nothing I can prove. So anyway, there was a big discussion and finally said, well, we're not going to insist because this guy might change his mind. And so he, the mayor said to the policeman, why don't you take them and get them out of this village. Well, he got us out of the place. By the time we got to the next guest house, beer house, he smelled beer again, and he said well, you go this way and then you go to next village. Maybe they will give you some paper. And he went into the beer hall. And we were free. I said, Michael, I said, we got out of something that could have turned out bad. The only thing it would have made us is killers. We trying to save our lives and it would have gone wrong. So we were lucky again. And somehow it was always a sense that we're going to make it. I mean the sense never left us, Michael and myself. And then, somehow, through luck or through our own thinking, or, or doing things the right way and uh, mostly luck, that we're going to make it. The one thing that never left me is the sense that if anybody's going to make it, I'm going to make it. And never give up hope. And Michael was the same way. And O.K. Now our actual liberation. So we went to the next village. And we noticed that this village when we got inside, on the outskirts of the village, there were fields that some people had next to their farms. We said we cannot be out in the open fields. There wasn't that much other vegetation there. Let's get close to the village where there are some bushes or something and sit down or lay down and go to sleep. The Americans got to be here anytime. So, we laid out there, and in the night we heard tanks rolling. And then we heard German voices, and we didn't know this, when we got there, they had placed that same evening what they called faukstorma (ph), which is the German national guard if you call it. They are old guys and young fellows. Last minute they put them into uniform and make soldiers out of them. And they had placed these guys with ponce so founst (ph) in little holes in the ground to be a defense against tanks. And ponce so foust (ph) is a, I'm not sure what, we call it a anti-tank weapon. It's a shoulder held weapon that one man can fire. It's not a gun and they can sit in a hole and usually one loads the gun and one fires the gun. And there

was one very close to us, and we wanted to, the first thing we wanted to do was when we would hear tanks coming across the field, go towards the tanks, put our arms up. But we figure if we do this we may get shot from behind or something for deserters in the dark or whatever. And we didn't want to get shot by the other side either you know, by the Americans. So as the tanks were coming across in the morning, it must have been about five o'clock in the morning, as it started getting a little light - no it wasn't getting light that time - but they started coming about five o'clock I think - I didn't have a watch - we decided we're going to move on the ground towards them. Well, somebody noticed something moving in that one hole, and they had in the meantime had holes on the right, probably on both sides of where we were _____. But we were far enough away not to be seen, maybe uh, hundred and fifty yards from each hole. I don't know, but we must have been right in the middle. And uh, one guy called over in German, what is that patrol (ph) - is this a patrol, because they didn't know from their own people that - they just thought it was a German army patrol. And I said to the guy, hel mut (ph), keep your mouth shut, shut up I said, and the guy was quiet you know. And he probably was believing that we were German patrols since he could only see us crawling. And then it takes the tank, one company of tanks for seventeen tanks, all of a sudden came across the field. And as soon as we saw the first tank coming we put up our hands and we were just hoping that they wouldn't start firing, because prisoners get shot sometimes too, even if you give up. Well, the lead tank, the guy jumped down, and he spoke German, he was a German-American that they used as an interpreter, and he made all the tanks stop and he brought the officers up, the commanding officer, and they radioed back to the battalion that they had some guys who were escaped prisoners, and to make a long story short, they used us. In other words, we knew what was in front of them. Which was the right thing to do and we were glad to do it. And they said you're prisoners, you look like prisoners. can you prove it? We showed the number on the arm and apparently some of them knew already. They had crossed a concentration camp, another one someplace. This was the Third Armored Division, D Company of the 32nd Armored Regiment of the Third Armored Division. One of Patton's divisions. And uh, so we had a small conference there, and they if we say any German army units, or they were particularly interested German 88 anti-tank guns, and I said all we know the German ponce de foust (ph), the anti-tank weapon, and they are all old or young guys as far as we can determine from their voices but we don't know for sure. We just crawled through. So they got on the tank with the P.

A: system and the guy in this German said there are no German army troops around, there are only the army helpers, the national guard or the uh, German folkstrom (ph), young guys and old people - that it would be silly to fire one shot because the moment the first shot is fired, they are going to destroy the village. And they hoisted white flags and they gave up and there was not one shot fired. And uh, so, then, it came to us, and we were taken back to battalion headquarters where the battalion surgeon examined us right away. We were then put on scales and uh, it was a small, like a small, not hospital, a batallion aid station. And they had all the medical equipment to take care of, and that was basically our liberation. And then the regimental commander came looking at us, congratulating us and then the company commander said if they want to stay with us, the boys they can stay with us. Then when they went into the village, they requisitioned a house for the two of us, and told the women to make a hot bath for us. That we were going to be bathed by

medics, and cleaned up completely, because they have to go on, and we can't go with lice with them on the tanks. That we have to be _____, and they came with Lysol and whatever you have as a disinfectant, and we were completely taken care of medically. And examined by a medical doctor or military doctor and found to be healthy, not have any communicable diseases. But it actually wasn't exact the first day, we went through a couple of days of check-ups. But in the meantime, we were then, the first thing to do was get rid of the lice. And that we did. And our hair shorn off again for last time. And uh, then, we stayed, to make a long story short, we stayed with D Company of this tank battalion for six months. The war was over in another few weeks. And they were taken out of combat immediately. After that village, that was their last combat session. And we stayed with them, and with an O.K. by the higher ups, that we can stay as long as we want to until we find our families, 'til we are certain we are finding anybody family. In the meantime, we are changed from these old prisoner garments to GI uniforms. We were just like soldiers without rank of course and we were treated in the mess hall like kings, and we had access to the mess hall, not during dinner hours but anytime we wanted to walk in eat. We picked up 50 pounds in three months. Which was really a dangerous thing to do because I heard a lot of prisoners overate, and we did too, and killed themselves overeating. And that basically is the story. And uh, so, then to finish up, after our escape, my first thought was to find the family, but I didn't know where to start. And first we had to get back on track, get normal again. So Michael and I stayed and like I said for six months. And then we were taken back, they were moved back to the area near Schofenborg (ph) which is near Frankfurt, into their regular area where they were going to settle down. This little town, which called Viny Koomstad (ph) near Frankfurt. And this company was then settled down and we settled down with them. We given a place, a place they requisitioned. So the first thing, we still didn't have any papers, the question of papers, what to do about papers. So they inquired with the police and say, they have to go to DP camps. When we heard camps, just the name camps, no way we're going to any camps. We didn't know at the time about DP camps. To us DP camps was another, a better concentration camp. You know, another camp. But it wasn't true of course. But we just heard the name camp and we said no. And uh, the batallion commander said the boys don't have to go to any camp if they don't want to. They just go to get papers. So they commander officer sent an officer with us to Frankfurt DP camp. This was right in the city of Frankfurt where there was a compound where all the Jewish refugees moved in. Ah, not just Jewish refugees, there were other refugees, but they were mostly Jews that had been liberated from camps or were picked up in other places, forced laborers from other foreign countries. They were in an enclosure and there was a guard at the gate but you could walk in and out once you had your papers. But people were taken care of medically and furnished papers after they were identified. So he took us in there and the uh, official said they have to stay here, they can't go back with you because they don't have any papers. It will take maybe, take weeks before we get any confirmation on them. And we have such a overload here anyway, and the lieutenant looked at us, and he said, well, what you decide boys. And the thing was up to us, not to this guy, official there. And I said we're not staying. Papers or no papers, we're not going to stay in another camp. And we stay with you. So he took us back and then there was an agreement reached that we can stay until we get papers, until we also, even after we get papers, we can stay with them while we decide where our families are, go back to, Michael to

Amsterdam, Holland, and my case go both to Brussels, Belgium, and Muchenglablak (ph), Germany. Because either place our family could have been. But we had decided in the case of my immediate family was in Brussels, Belgium. My parents that we would meet in Brussels, Belgium. Or meet in Muchenglablak (ph) with a Catholic family that we know. So I went to both places. Didn't find of course anybody. And I did find some distant cousins and I did make some contact with the Joint Distribution Committee, which was of course a Jewish organization. And although I didn't find anybody, I stayed in Brussels, and uh, was taken care of by the Jewish organization in Brussels, and then the thing I have to get some education and so on, and then I, by that time I was almost 19. No, by the time I came back I was 19 already. Uh, they said that I am too old for an orphanage, too lot Jewish orphans or kids that were picked up after the war. But the man that ran the Joint Distribution Organization in Brussels was Mr. Munsba (ph) who had been one of my father's friends in one of the camps, in the French camps of St. Cyprien, and he said, well, 18 is the limit for orphanages, but you're past limit, but we'll let you have a little room in here, and you find a job. We'll put you through school. We'll do something for you. So I got a little room in the orphanage there and I went to school, back to school, and tried to learn a trade at the same time. And Michael went back to Holland at the same time. He wasn't as lucky as I was. He didn't find, well I didn't find anybody. He didn't find anyone from his family. Everybody was killed. And uh, he didn't have the offer to go into an orphanage or anything up there. So he went back to the Third Armored Division. They had given him papers, they had given me papers too, to use official transportation and just like military, like an American military guy, to get back to this place in Germany. We were fully covered. So Michael took advantage of that and uh, make his long story afterward short, he was adopted by an American soldier, non-Jewish soldier, to come to the United States. And he stayed with him until he actually left for the United States. I remained in Belgium, and I also came to the United States, but I came in a different way. I came by asking for visa to go to the United States, and I had to wait until December '47 to get to the United States. I did get to the United States. And the draft was still going on here. I was going to be drafted. In Europe, if you were in Germany of course, but Germany didn't have an army, but other countries, like France, or Belgium, they were still drafting too after the war for a while. I would have been subject to the draft. Well, it would have been a bad thing after the concentration camps of course. You know, you want to lead a regular life. But here the United States had nothing to do with me, that my past was in a concentration camp. I would have been subject to the draft. So what I did instead, I volunteered for military service with the agreement they had at this time to get the GI Bill, or to remain and make the military a career. What I was after getting an education from the military. I did exactly that. I came in as an enlisted man, I became a sergeant, then became a citizen and when I got my citizenship was able to go to Officer's Candidate School and became an officer and make the Army a career for twenty years. And uh, I had by initial boots anyway with the army after my liberation and I was very successful. And then I joined the civil service after my military career. And I was another twenty years in the civil service. But I probably missed the story that is very close to my heart that I wanted to mention about my children, about my wife. And I married a German woman who's not Jewish, and my children grew up Jewish in remembrance of my parents. And nothing else, if I don't feel that strong about religion, I wanted them to have something. Everybody should grow up with a religion, and have a

belief, believe in something. And the closest thing to me was being Jewish, and closer than that, that my parents had to die because they were Jews, the sole reason, because they were Jews. And uh, I'm going to bring up one more thing here. Uh, about two months ago, I made a trip to Germany. And I visited my, the old folks are not alive anymore, the Christian people that helped my family, that helped my grandparents who by the way were deported to Lasenstadt (ph), the ghetto and also perished, including an 80 year old grandfather. My father, before he died, sat down with me in the camps at night, and tried to recall everybody that was left from the Willner family in Germany. And that possibly also had the same fate that we had went to the concentration camps. Uh, he had a very good memory, and he counted out all the people, naming names, and I must have known personally maybe two-thirds of the people that he mentioned. The others were not known to me. But they were all the Willner family - it was a close, closely-knit family who all lived in the Rhineland of Germany, near Cologne-Dusseldorf. So the distances weren't very great, they even weren't spread out over Germany. I think one lived in Berlin, but the rest of them lived in the Rhineland and had been living there for the past four hundred years. I even have some documentation that I got in Germany, with the Hebrew name of one of my ancestors who first had the name of Willner and he had a Hebrew name of course too. And uh, it was done by a doctoral dissertation by a German after the war, and he picked the Willners as one of the families that he did his dissertation on. And so when I visited recently, uh, I knew this before I went that in months of August and September, they inviting Jews back to the city as guests of the city of Muchenglak, which have done some other cities in Germany. My name wasn't on the list to be there, but since I was visiting on my own with my friends, I was passed on to some city officials to tell me someone visiting early and they made a joke of it. They got their dates wrong. And, uh I didn't get the dates wrong because this was a personal visit I was making to Germany and some other country. And uh, I agreed that I would see some city officials who wanted some advance information on what a person like me who comes back to his former hometown would feel like. They had a lot of apprehension that for instance, one person in '85, an old lady, wrote them a letter and said, what is this good for, why reopen old wounds. Why are you inviting us back here? Well, to make a long story short, out of the people they invited, probably about 90% of the people are coming. As the guests of the city, for one week. Uh, they were very apprehensive, and really wanted to know, particularly from one who got the worst. In other words, they are inviting people back who escaped Germany. They are Holocaust survivors, but they were either in United States, in Great Britain, in uh Australia or some other place. But they didn't know how many had been in a concentration camp. Since I had been in concentration camp and uh, also probably am one of the youngest, if not the youngest, I was told, in the group that was coming back. They wanted to know how I would feel about this, how I would feel about collective guilt, which by the way, I don't believe in collective guilt. There are also good Germans just as well as there are bad Germans, and I am sorry to say that I've seen people in this country . . . END OF TAPE but then he said I'm very hesitant to do this, but I see that you are interested in this, that you're into what happened to your family, that you went in search of your family after the war. I have a book that recently came out that the German government put out that has about 150,000 names, 125 or 150 thousand I don't remember exactly of German Jews that perished.

Conclusion of Interview.